

The Imitation of Christ

If someone asks you to name the all-time bestselling book, you'd most likely answer "The Bible." And you'd be right. But you might not have heard of the second-most sold and translated work of Christianity after the Bible ... *The Imitation of Christ*, written by the medieval monk Thomas à Kempis in the early 15th century.

Thomas, in his role of instructing novices in the spiritual life, laid out the primary requirements for the spiritually serious: "We must imitate Christ's life and his ways if we are to be truly enlightened and set free from the darkness of our own hearts. Let it be the most important thing we do, then, to reflect on the life of Jesus Christ."

Throughout the book, Thomas's advice was consistent: "Do not trust yourself, do not indulge yourself, do not put yourself forward; instead, put your full trust in God and, out of love for God's will, yield to all the circumstances of life into which God places you." Though he didn't live through the 2020 pandemic, memories of one of the worst plagues in history ravaged Europe's shores 30 years before his birth claiming the lives of some 25 to 50 million people. Yet despite this recent history, he still said, "yield to all the circumstances of life into which God places you."

How did Thomas become so knowledgeable about Christ? He read scripture regularly. In addition, he also copied the entire Bible four different times in his role as religious and copyist. Based on the insights he gained from this exercise, he was able to present many of the Bible's teachings in a way that were easily understood and practical.

Here are several of the practical suggestions he offers to someone who wants to draw closer to God.

- If you wish to live in peace and harmony with others, you must learn to discipline yourself in many ways.
- If you knew how much peace for yourself and joy for others your good efforts [at breaking old habits] could bring, I think you would be more anxious for spiritual growth.
- Let temporal things serve thy use, but the eternal be the object of thy desire.
- Therefore, in every deed and every thought, act as though you were to die this very day. If you are not prepared today, how will you be prepared tomorrow? Tomorrow is an uncertain day; how do you know you will have a tomorrow?
- What most of all hinders heavenly consolation is that you are too slow in turning yourself to prayer.
- If every year we uprooted a single fault, we should soon [an overstatement] become perfect.
- At the Day of Judgment, we shall not be asked what we have read but what we have done; not how well we have spoken, but how holy we have lived. As St. James wrote, "*Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. Those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.*" {James 1: 23, 25}

- Finally, I want to teach you the way of peace and true liberty. There are four things you must do. First, strive to do another's will rather than your own. Second, choose always to have less than more. Third, seek the lower places in life, dying to the need to be recognized and important. Fourth, always and in everything desire that the will of God may be completely fulfilled in you. The person who tries this will be treading the frontiers of peace and rest.

Reflective Questions:

1. Of the four ways of peace and true liberty listed below which do you find hardest to do?

- Strive to do another's will rather than your own.
- Choose always to have less than more.
- Seek the lower places in life, dying to the need to be recognized and important.
- Always and in everything desire that the will of God may be completely fulfilled in you.

Why? _____

2. Thomas said, "If every year we uprooted a single fault, we should soon [an overstatement] become perfect."

a. What single fault would you like to uproot this year? _____

b. How will you go about it? _____

3. One of Thomas' recommendations is that "In every deed and every thought, act as though you were to die this very day." If it turned out that today was to be your last day, how would you live it?

(Be as specific as you can.)

